

Drug ban 'too harsh' on Olympic athletes

UK doping agency calls for change in the rules

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Olympic athletes who test positive for cocaine and Ecstasy should not face an automatic ban from competing, the British anti-doping agency has said.

Professional sportsmen and women currently face a two-year ban if they are found to have the illegal substances in their system during competition.

But in a document seen by *The Times*, UK Anti-Doping, the agency responsible for random testing of British athletes, says that the sanctions are disproportionately harsh. Regulations on recreational drugs and medications, including asthma inhalers, should be relaxed in time for the London Games, the report says.

Drugs such as Ecstasy and cocaine are judged by scientists to have no performance-enhancing effects in most sports. But former Olympians and anti-drug campaigners fear that relaxing the penalties for illegal drug use could send out the wrong message

Phelps: banned for a bong

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to young people and fans who look up to athletes as role models.

The British sprint gold medallist Mark Lewis-Francis and the American swimmer Michael Phelps, who won eight golds in Beijing, are among Olympic athletes who have tested positive for recreational drugs. Both men were suspected of using cannabis; Phelps was banned for three months and Lewis-Francis was given a public warning.

As London starts its one-year countdown today to the opening ceremony of the Games, Michael Stow, the head of science and medicine at UKAD, said that the career of promising young athletes should no longer be blighted by using Class A drugs in "a social setting" that might have no impact on their sporting ability.

In a document sent to the World

Anti-Doping Agency, UKAD recommends that penalties for the use of cocaine, Ecstasy and the stimulant BZP should be downgraded and made more flexible. Those who test positive would no longer be given an automatic two-year ban, although sanctions could range from a written warning to a discretionary ban of up to two years.

"These stimulants should absolutely still be prohibited, but we'd like more flexibility in the sanction we give," Mr Stow said. "If we think someone's been taking a substance to cheat, we would still give two years, but more often it's a case of them being used in a social setting. We want the prohibited list to be an evidence-based document, not a question of morals and ethics."

His organisation also recommends that all conventional asthma inhalers be permitted for athletes, provided they are used within manufacturers' guidelines. Currently, athletes have to provide exemption certificates for certain types of inhaler, despite a lack of evidence for any performance-enhancing effect in non-asthmatic athletes.

The world anti-doping delegates meet in Montreal next month and, if they vote in favour, the change would be adopted in time for the Olympics.

Baroness Grey-Thompson, a board member of UK Athletics and a former Paralympian who won 11 gold medals during her career, warned that downgrading penalties for recreational drug use would send the wrong signals to athletes and the public.

"I can understand why UKAD would want to differentiate between recreational and performance-enhancing drugs but I think if you choose to be an athlete and are in the public eye, you have a certain responsibility of how to behave," she said. "Any drugs are not a good thing. None of us want to see British athletes banned but the way to achieve that is not taking drugs in the first place."

Mark Gay, head of sports group at the law firm DLA Piper, who successfully prosecuted Javier Sotomayor, the Cuban high jumper, for cocaine use during competition, said that it was

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